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Conferees Stumble Into Endowment Bill Agreement

By Phillip M. Kadis

Washington Star Staff Writer

Somehow the solons got it all together and ironed out the details of the arts and humanities bill.

They scrapped and haggled to the end, spilling water on the conference committee table in agitation.

Acoustics in the cramped and stuffy House meeting room were so bad, they could hardly hear each other. They tried in vain, at first, to assert the authority of office to silence an unhearing but garrulous staffer who would not surrender the telephone, their sole link to the Senate, where attempts were under way to head off another filibuster, this one on the Senate floor.

After she finally relented, the phone kept ringing to summon and resummon Sens. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., and Jacob Javits, R-N.Y., who began to look like Olympic finalists as they hurdled the outstretched legs of committee staffers and onlookers in the crowded quarters, legged it over to the Senate side of the Capitol to cast their votes and then hurried back.

AND IT WAS THE TELEPHONE that finally saved the day.

Agreement by late yesterday afternoon had been reached on all details of the \$250-million bill except one — after more than a month of false starts, acrimony, postponements and wrangling — and the conferees were anxious to wind it up and move on to more important matters like education and anti-trust and taxes.

The compromise reached last week, after private conversations between conference chairman Pell and chief House conferee John Brademas, D-Ind., did not become unstuck. It was simply fleshed out and modified slightly save for a minor point that was ironically a little too sticky.

The final one had to do with a Bicentennial challenge grant program in the Senate bill at the behest of Javits but absent from the House bill. Challenge grants are those which permit the arts and humanities endowments to draw on the U.S. Treasury for additional funds if outside matching funds are obtained.

The problem Bicentennial program was the brainstorm of philanthropist John D. Rockefeller III.

It calls for in-depth studies of problems American Society is likely to encounter in the next 100 years. Assessing goals and priorities and founding principles. The sort of thing a Rockefeller can get excited about, the way Nelson Rockefeller did with his Commission on Critical Choices for America between stints in high public office.

JAVITS, WHO HAD ALREADY shown himself willing to let the National Endowment for the Humanities decide for itself whether it wished to pursue such a program, told the conferees that language drawn up by the House staff the past week had "kissed off" the whole program.

The House, in fact, had watered down the sociological implications of the Senate language, restricting the studies essentially to cultural problems.

Javits, on a handwritten slip of paper, proposed language that would preserve some of the broader

concerns envisioned in the Senate version, including a phrase calling for "citizen participation" in decision-making processes.

The phrase clearly upset the ranking House Republican conferee, Albert H. Quie of Minnesota, who in previous conference committee sessions had thrown cold water on suggestions that Humanities Endowment funds be used to clean up pollution and old beer cans or to "chase out crooks" from the municipal governments.

THIS TIME, HE ACCIDENTALLY knocked over a glass of water as he reached for the note containing Javits' proposed language.

"The word 'citizen' makes him nervous," said Javits laughing, then requesting that his remark be stricken from the record.

"I am less sensitive than the congressman about these matters," said Brademas diplomatically, "but I am sensitive to his sensitivities."

What appeared to trouble Quie, however, was the word "participation," and the specter it evoked of the controversial and highly-charged experiments under the Office of Economic Opportunity in which federal funds were used to challenge decisions of local elected officials. Those programs were dismantled under the Nixon Administration.

Quie wanted to make certain that the "Arts, Humanities, and Cultural Affairs Act of 1976" didn't contain any red flags for anti-arts bulls on Capitol Hill.

While both sides considered suitable language, Javits pushed for raising the ceiling on challenge grant funds from \$10 million in the first year and \$15 million in the second (an amount already upgraded by the House conferees to more nearly approach the Senate's \$15 million and \$20 million, respectively). Javits also wanted a waiver of the matching requirement for at least 20 percent of the funds, at least for the Rockefeller Bicentennial program.

Brademas looked across the table at Javits, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

"CAN WE PUT DOWN 'provided the Rockefeller Foundation will pick up the matching money?'" he asked.

They dickered and finally settled on \$12 million and \$18 million with a 15 percent waiver. Only, said Brademas, because he wanted to bring the conference to a successful end, and because the waiver applied to a discretionary item. "Citizens" stayed in. "Participation" was removed.

Just as Brademas was about to review the final agreements, Javits requested a moment to make a phone call to "a friend."

"He's going to call Rockefeller," said a staffer, with several others chiming in.

Javits returned in a few minutes, all smiles. Language approved. Deal sealed.

The nation's artists culturocracy could breathe a sigh of relief. The myriad of programs funded by both endowments would not be abandoned.

Tomorrow, some of the same conferees will take up a \$36 billion education bill.

"You watch," said one veteran of legislative affairs, "they'll wrap that one up in four hours."